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New Intrigue in Pope's Shooting

If the former deputy commercial attaché of the Bulgarian Embassy in Paris is to be believed, and if he is indeed the former deputy commercial attaché, Bulgarian and Soviet intelligence agents were behind the attempt two years ago to assassinate Pope John Paul II. The account supported statements by Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turk who has told his Italian captors that he shot the Pope at the behest of Bulgarian agents.

The New York Times last week reported that the Bulgarian in Paris,

The World



Sergei I. Antonov

Jordan Mantarov, defected two months after the May 1981 shooting and told his story to French intelligence agents who found it credible. Mr. Mantarov reportedly quoted a friend, whom he identified as a high Bulgarian counterintelligence official, as saying that Moscow and Sofia regarded the Polish Pope as a protagonist in an American effort to break Poland out of the Communist bloc.

The two Communist Governments have repeatedly denied any involvement with Mr. Agca, accusing Western intelligence agencies of fabricating a connection. Bulgarian officials said Mr. Mantarov had been a maintenance mechanic for a Bulgarian company in Paris, not an embassy employee.

Italian sources familiar with the investigation said that one suspect, Sergei I. Antonov, a Bulgarian airline official in Rome, had told contradictory stories that cast doubt on his denial of complicity. Another Bulgarian, Veltchko Peitchev, who defected in 1973, said he was an old acquaintance of Mr. Antonov, whom he identified as an intelligence agent sent to Rome because of family contacts with Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian Communist Party leader. "Antonov has lied repeatedly and the Italians can prove it," Mr. Peitchev insisted. Last week, an Italian court rejected Mr. Antonov's appeal for release.

The Italian magistrate conducting an inquiry to determine whether prosecution of Mr. Antonov is warranted hoped to complete his investigation this year.

Henry Gimiger
and Milt Freudenberg
